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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) and suggests strategies for maximizing existing resources in rural settings to meet the requirements of the law. The purposes of this paper are to: (1) discuss personnel preparation data relevant to ensuring that all individuals possess the necessary competencies to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general and special education settings; (2) present the key provisions of IDEA that relate to ensuring quality personnel preparation and educational services in rural settings; and (3) identify ways in which personnel preparation activities and utilization of existing resources in rural settings can be maximized to ensure full implementation of IDEA. Key areas of the legislation include evaluation and reevaluation of students, the Individualized Education Program (IEP), and IEP transition services. Instructional implications for teacher educators are discussed for each of these areas, focusing on the skills and knowledge that teachers will need relevant to the following IDEA requirements: parent participation in student evaluations, collection and interpretation of information for evaluations and IEPs, design of appropriate curriculum modification, regular communication with parents, design of functional behavioral assessments and intervention plans, consideration of the child's linguistic needs or need for assistive technology, and design of transition services. (CDS)

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PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE PROVISIONS OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT OF 1997(IDEA) IN RURAL SETTINGS

Many of the new provisions of Public Law 105-17, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA), contain significant implications for teacher educators and practitioners and pose particular challenges to those committed to ensuring that the requirements are met for children and youth with disabilities in rural settings. Indeed, the characteristics of rural settings, including availability of personnel and access to resources needed to fully implement the requirements of the Act, intensify the implications. The purposes of this paper are to: (1) discuss personnel preparation data relevant to ensuring all individuals possess the necessary competencies to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general and special education settings; (2) present the key provisions of IDEA that relate to ensuring quality personnel preparation and educational services in rural settings; and (3) identify ways in which personnel preparation activities and utilization of existing resources in rural settings can be maximized to ensure full implementation of the IDEA.

As we move rapidly toward the twenty-first century, the educational community is faced with a myriad of challenges in ensuring that all students receive their instruction from well-trained, competent teachers and other practitioners and that their course work and other related activities prepare them to be contributing members of our society. We, as educators, understand the complexity of this undertaking and are striving to meet the need through restructuring both our teacher preparation programs and our schools. A focus of this endeavor must include those students who are receiving their preschool, elementary and secondary education in rural settings, and our teacher preparation activities, both pre-service and in-service, must include creative ways of providing the needed personnel preparation in those settings.

A call to ensure quality teacher preparation for all students was issued in 1994 by the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (Darling-Hammond, 1994). They stated that the alignment of local, state, and federal policies was necessary in order to have a seamless system of professional development from recruitment to retirement, with effective, collaborative partnerships that lead to high standards of teaching. Two years later, the bipartisan National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, in its report entitled "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future," cited teacher preparation as one of a number of deficiencies affecting teaching and learning in America's schools and issued a call to recruit, prepare, and support excellent teachers for every school (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996).

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However, the annual 1997 Education Week/Pew Charitable Trusts Report on Education in the 50 states indicated that Schools of Education in institutions of higher education are not currently producing teachers who are qualified to educate America's children and youth (Quality Counts, 1997). More recent data suggests that a critical shortage of teachers who are fully certified to teach in their field continues (Quality Counts, 1999). For students with disabilities, with each passing year, the number of teachers fully certified to teach them decreases (For IDEA, many states rely on fewer teachers, 1998). Indeed, the U.S. Department of Education states that there is "convincing evidence of a national substantial chronic shortage of special education teachers who are fully certified in their positions. Evidence suggests that the number of graduates in special education teacher preparation programs is much too low to satisfy the need for fully certified teachers" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. vi). It is reasonable to assume that this shortage of personnel, both in quantity as well as in quality of personnel fully certified to teach students with disabilities, is at least as high, if not higher, in rural areas.

As recently as January, 1999, the need for qualified teachers and educational accountability has been expressed by federal officials (Clinton's State of the Union Address, 1999). The administration's intent to ensure a well-trained cadre of teachers to meet the needs of all students, including those with disabilities, was expressed clearly in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) in June, 1997. To support the preparation of competent personnel, the IDEA included a competitive grant program, the State Program Improvement Grants for Children with Disabilities (SIG), designed to assist state education agencies, working in partnership with institutions of higher education and other entities within the state, to ensure the preparation of a competent teaching force. At least 75% of the monies for these grants, between $500,000 and $2 million per year for five years, must be utilized for personnel development activities at both the pre-service and in-service levels. As part of the application process for these grants, the state education agency must submit a State Improvement Plan (SIP) that describes how the State will (a) prepare general and special education personnel with the content knowledge and collaborative skills needed to meet the needs of children with disabilities; (b) prepare professionals and paraprofessionals in the area of early intervention with the content knowledge and collaborative skills needed to meet the needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities; (c) work with institutions of higher education and other entities that (on both a pre-service and an in-service basis) prepare personnel who work with children with disabilities to ensure that those institutions and entities develop the capacity to support quality professional development programs that meet State and local needs; and (d) enhance the ability of teachers and others to use strategies, such as behavioral intervention, to address the conduct of children with disabilities that impedes their learning and the learning of others (Public Law 105-17, 1997).

This language is clearly designed to impact positively the current teacher shortage. As we look at the potential of this legislation for improving the teaching and learning of students with disabilities in rural settings, it becomes clear that state education agencies must work with institutions of higher education to develop ways to increase the number of teachers currently providing services to students with disabilities and decrease, and potentially eliminate, the number of personnel working without appropriate credentials, particularly in the area of special education. States must devise ways for minimizing the barriers posed by geographic constraints for accessing teacher preparation programs that are experienced in rural settings. Further, states must utilize these funds to support both pre-service and in-service programs that are designed to address the educational needs of infants, toddlers, children and youth who reside in rural environments. Moreover, states must devise incentives, including financial incentives and quality personnel preparation activities, to attract and retain their teachers.

For true educational restructuring that results in improved teaching, learning, and educational outcomes to occur, the way in which we deliver instruction to students with disabilities must be part of

this process. This means that each individual student's abilities and needs must be examined carefully to determine the most beneficial match between general classroom instruction and the delivery of special education services. This philosophy is supported through the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements of the IDEA. The IDEA of 1997 stipulates that students be removed from general education programs only when the nature or severity of their disability is such that education in general education classrooms, even with the use of supplementary aids and services, cannot be provided satisfactorily. The IDEA mandates that students with disabilities receive their education with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.

Provisions for an appropriate education for special education students in the least restrictive environment continues to be a real challenge to schools. According to the 20th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, "in 1995-96, more than 95% of students with disabilities, ages 6 though 21, attended schools with their nondisabled peers." (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. III-34). Approximately 45% of these students spend approximately 80% of their entire school day in general education classes and another 24% students were enrolled in general education settings between 21 and 60% of their day (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The percentage of learners with disabilities attending general education classes has increased steadily every year since the advent of P.L. 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, and all indications are this trend will continue. Providing educational services to students with disabilities in general education settings calls for a "shared ownership" approach to meetings the educational needs of students with disabilities by general and special educators. In reality, this partnership is requiring that many general educators assume an increased responsibility for students with disabilities in their classes without the concomitant personnel preparation and effective support systems necessary to do the job. For many of them, their active participation in the design and delivery of individualized programs for students with disabilities with the required supplementary aids and services, adaptations, modifications, and accommodations requires an increase in their knowledge base and a willingness to open their traditionally private classrooms to special educators. For special educators, inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms requires skill in effectively interacting with other professionals and sharing responsibility for students once considered the domain of special education alone. For both special and general educators, inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms requires collaboration and communication skills and competencies that neither have been taught during their pre-service preparation. Including students with disabilities in general education classrooms creates a need for communication, coordination, and collaboration among a total school staff, as well as other stakeholders, such as community agencies and the business community, to enable them to implement responsible inclusion with the necessary array of programs, services, and supports.

The increased focus on the general education curriculum and the expanded role of all educators in the education of students with disabilities is paramount in the IDEA of 1997. For purposes of this article, these changes and the instructional implications associated with each change for teacher educators will be addressed by the following provisions: Evaluation and Reevaluation; Individualized Education Program (IEP); and Individualized Education Program-Transition Services.

Evaluation/Reevaluation

The provisions of the IDEA that address the evaluation and reevaluation of students with disabilities consists of several major components. The 1997 IDEA amendments require (1) participation of parent(s) for both initial and triennial evaluations; and (2)consideration of information provided by the parent by the evaluation team when determining eligibility for special education and related services and by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team when

determining the educational programs, services, and supports needed for the student to achieve satisfactorily in the general education setting.

The instructional implications for teacher educators based on these new provisions are many. Practitioners need to be prepared with the knowledge and skills to communicate with parents, including those with culturally and linguistically diverse needs. Practitioners will need to possess sophisticated skills for listening, requesting information in a non-threatening and non-judgmental manner, and conducting meaningful parent conferences and quality IEP meetings. All practitioners and parents need to be aware of, and utilize, the resources available through federally-funded clearinghouses such as the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY), the technical assistance centers such as the Technical Assistance to Parent Programs (TAPP) Network, the federally-funded Parent Training and Information Centers (PTI) that exist in all states, and state affiliates of national disability and advocacy organizations. These resources are particularly critical for those in rural areas as they strive to provide parents with necessary information to ensure their full and equitable participation in the educational decision-making regarding their son or daughter's educational program.

Practitioners must also be skilled in obtaining, interpreting, utilizing, and reporting information to incorporate into evaluations, reevaluations, and individual education programs (IEP). Observational skills need to be well-honed. All practitioners must be competent to select, administer, and interpret a myriad of assessment strategies, including norm- and criterion-referenced, authentic, and teacher made tests to determine what factors are contributing to a student's learning and motivation.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

The new provisions require that the Individualized Education Program (IEP) include the following: (1) a statement of the student's present level of performance which includes how the student's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum; (2) measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short term objectives that are related to the student's needs and that are designed in such a way as to enable him or her to be involved in the general education curriculum; (3) a statement of special education and related services and the supplementary aids and services to be provided to the student; and (4) a statement of program modifications and supports for school personnel that will be provided on behalf of the student. Moreover, the new regulations also require that the IEP include (a) a statement of how the child's progress toward the annual goals will be measured; and (b) how the child's parents will be regularly informed (through such means as periodic report cards) at least as often as parents are informed of their nondisabled child's progress. Finally, the new regulations require that the student's general education teacher participate in the development, review, and revision of the student's IEP, if the student is, or is likely to be, enrolled in the general education program.

In order to implement the above outlined provisions of the IEP, teachers and other support personnel need to know the components of the general education curriculum to ensure they have the know how to adopt/accommodate them. In order that they may design appropriate program modifications, prospective and veteran teachers need to be knowledgeable regarding the roles and responsibilities of general educators. These regulations reinforce the need for all practitioners to develop a repertoire of communication strategies to parents including telephone calls, journals, notes, newsletters, two-way notebooks, and electronic means such as voice mail, facsimiles, and e-mail. Teachers, through pre-service and in-service activities, must also develop competencies for conducting authentic assessments and implementing alternative forms of grading, such as contract grading, pass/fail, videotaping, and work samples.

Another significant addition to the reauthorization is the requirement that all teachers, including general educators, participate in the design and implementation of a functional behavioral assessment and a behavioral intervention plan for students whose behavior is interfering with his or her learning or the learning of others. All teachers must be skilled in assisting in the determination of appropriate positive behavioral interventions. The provision allows for the assistance of school psychologists and social workers in developing these behavioral interventions and program modifications and reinforces the need for collaborative planning. Collaboration involved with the student's program is crucial to its success. Several programs with require significant collaboration for success include school-wide behavioral intervention plans, wrap-around programs, and peer mediation. We must ensure that all pre-service programs include these strategies in their instructional programs. As noted in the National Agenda for Achieving Better Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance (U.S. Department of Education, 1994), collaboration involved with the student's program is crucial to its success.

The new regulations added four scenarios in addition to the consideration of the student's behavior that impact personnel preparation activities. Specifically, the regulations require that the IEP team consider whether (a) the child needs assistive technology aids and services; (b) the child who is considered Limited English Proficient needs special education and related services in English or another language; (c) a child who is blind or visually impaired needs instruction in Braille; and (d) a child who is deaf or hard of hearing is being provided with appropriate opportunities for direct communication with peers and professional personnel and whether the student's language and communication needs are being met.

These regulations pose particular challenges to teacher education programs, particularly those programs preparing teachers for rural areas, as more and more students with disabilities, including those with culturally and linguistically diverse needs and low incidence disabilities, are being included in general education programs. These regulations, as much as any of the others, dictate that future teachers must have command of the resources which are available within their school, district, state, and from federally-funded projects. They also require critical collaboration skills with all possible service providers, including bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESOL) teachers, related services personnel such as occupational and physical therapists, orientation and mobility specialists, speech and language pathologists, and educational interpreters. They must ensure that they have at least a working knowledge of the common assistive technology aids and services, including augmentative and facilitative communication devices. They must also ensure that they are able to recognize the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families and work in concert with them to ensure their children are provided quality educational opportunities.

Individualized Education Program-Transition Services

The transition services provisions of the IDEA 1997 are included in the IEP section of the regulations. We have chosen to discuss these services separately since they are so crucial for students, their families, and teacher educators. In addition, it is through quality transition services that we will address the call for all educational reforms to ensure that students are prepared for the workplace after exiting school.

Transition services are defined as a set of coordinated activities that are designed within an outcome-oriented process which promotes movement from school to postschool activities. Transition services are based on an individual's needs, taking to account the student's preferences and interests. A statement of needed transition services must be included in the IEP of every student beginning at age 16, or at a younger age if appropriate.

Several important requirements have been added to the transition services area in IDEA 1997. First, the statement of needed transition services now includes needed related services. Second, the new requirements provide for the invitation of the student, at any age, to his or her IEP meeting if the purpose of the meeting is to consider transition services. Third, beginning at age 14, the IEP must have a statement of the transition service needs that focus on the student's courses of study to assist the student in selecting courses that will help him/her in being prepared for his/her chosen postsecondary activity.

Delivering quality transition programs in rural settings has always posed challenges to students, families and educators given the paucity of training activities and employment opportunities and sometimes related services personnel and adult services providers. However, teachers must realize that there are successful transition programs in rural areas. They need to be aware of such resources as the National Transition Alliance and the National School to Work office where much valuable information can be obtained. Many of these success programs have involved initiation of their own entrepreneurial ventures to ensure the contextual learning needed by students as well as ensure sustainability of the venture within the community. Such programs will ensure jobs for the students upon exiting the school setting. Engagement of the school with the business community in this way fosters linkages critical to postschool employment opportunities. Practitioners should also access the services of other local, state and federal governmental agencies such as Bureau of Indian Affairs, Health and Human Services, and Department of Labor to access programs and funding streams to meet the needs of transitioning youth.

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, we have suggested strategies for maximizing existing resources in rural settings to meet the requirements of the IDEA. There are many questions and challenges that still need to be addressed to ensure that all students have available to them a competent teacher and support personnel. For example, How does a quality teacher education program meet the needs of student teachers who are hours and miles away from the program? How do teacher preparation programs assure these provisions of the IDEA of 1997 are fully implemented in rural areas?

Most discussions and writings on the topic of quality education for all students assume access to services while failing to understand the issues specific to rural settings. In rural settings, additional resources such as crisis intervention personnel, social work personnel, psychological personnel, counseling personnel including rehabilitation counselors, and parent counseling and training personnel may all be needed and may not be readily accessible. Institutions of higher education may be the conduit in the state that connects the needs to the services. It is further suggested that rural practitioners create a wrap-around system of support for their students and families. In order for this wrap-around approach to be successful, teacher educators must assure that practitioners are aware of the components of a successful wrap-around program and must oftentimes assist in developing such service models. Similarly, practitioners must engage the resources of the business community and other community agencies in working in concert to provide the needed services.

Distance education is a must for teacher preparation in rural areas. Use of internet programs, public television presentations, e-mail correspondence, teacher talk networks, course modules, and other distant delivery models are paramount and many prototypes of this type of service delivery model are being developed throughout the country. It is only through working together with all stakeholders that we will meet the needs of infants, toddlers, children, and youth in rural settings.

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